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Re-Imagining Animation: The Changing Face of the Moving Image,

by Paul Wells and Johnny Hardstaff

(Switzerland, AVA Publishing, 2008)

Book review by Chris Carter

(Draft Do Not Distribute Do Not Quote)

Advances in digital technology have caused a radical shift in moving image culture. This has occurred in both modes of production and sites of exhibition, resulting in a blurring of boundaries that previously defined a range of creative disciplines. *Re-imagining animation: The changing face of the moving image*, by Paul Wells and Johnny Hardstaff, argues that as a result of these blurred disciplinary boundaries, the term 'animation' has become a "catch all" for describing any form of manipulated moving image practice. Understanding animation predicates the need to [re]define the medium within contemporary moving image culture. Via a series of case studies, the text engages with a range of moving image works, interrogating "how the many and varied approaches to making film, graphics, visual artefacts, multimedia and other intimations of motion pictures can now be delineated and understood", (p. 7). The structure and clarity of content makes this book ideally suited to any serious study of contemporary animation which accepts animation as a truly interdisciplinary medium.

The structure of *Re-imagining animation* adheres to the format common to other AVA Academia publications. Each section provides a theoretical background to the topic being discussed before moving onto case studies that successfully contextualise theory within practice. Essentially the authors look to the nexus shared between history, theory and practice as a way of addressing contemporary issues in animation. Those familiar with previous work of Paul Wells may recognise this 'animation praxis' in Wells adage; "no theory without practice; no practice without theory; no progress without history...", (p. 20). The text strikes a satisfying balance between theory and practice, although some sections left me wanting more theoretical discussion before moving onto case studies. According to the authors "at all points the book seeks to raise questions and ideas, and to stimulate response and debate with the reader", (p. 10). They succeed in doing so, however, the text functions as much more than a stimulus for debate. It also functions as a starting point for postgraduate animation students and practice-led researchers trying to contextualise their own research. By addressing animation praxis through the authorial intentions of its creator, Wells and Hardstaff have provided a clear theoretical framework for those seeking to understand how their

own unique form of animation praxis may inform and be informed by the 're-imagining' of animation.

The authors introduce the notion that animation has become central to moving image practices and that “definitions of social, cultural and arts practices are unclear, subject to blurred disciplinary boundaries and predicated on uncertain ends and outcomes”,(p. 8). The premise that animation has become central to moving image practice, introduces a risk of animation absorbing all other forms of the moving image. The authors argue that it is important to delineate animation from other forms of practice, specifically resisting the apparent “homogeneity” with cinema. However, by promoting any form of manipulated moving image practice as animation, the authors have failed to indicate at which point we may consider something to *not* be animation. At what point does something cease to be animation and become a game, a virtual world, augmented reality, or multimedia? Indeed all of these involve the use of animation as a core component but does this make them animation? If they are animation, why can't animation be them? This is a difficult problem to address and based on the argument presented by the authors, one which seems is best handled by considering the wider context of the works production and the intentions of its creator.

Animation Genre and Authorship, an earlier text written by Wells (2002), argues that auteur theory can provide a vocabulary by which case studies in animation may be addressed. Wells (2002, 73) argues that animation may be “viewed as the most auteurist of film practices” and that “it is crucial to recover the debates about authorship and apply them to the variety of approaches in the field of animation”. In *Re-imagining animation*, Wells and Hardstaff continue this line of argument stating that in order to re-imagine and re-define animation, it is:

..of critical importance to re-explore animation through the intentions of its creator and the contexts in which it was made. It is this more than anything else, that re-defines and re-imagines animation as a state-of-the-art vehicle for moving image cultures, (p. 7).

This relationship shared between the creator, their work and the context of production allows animation to be delineated further from other forms of manipulated moving image practice. This approach is significant for the practice-led researcher, it gives a voice to the practitioner and accepts the knowledge embodied in the animators practice. This form of knowledge is often

considered to be tacit knowledge, an idea commonly associated with practice-led research and the qualitative methods associated with reflective practice.

For the practice-led researcher in animation, the blurring of disciplinary boundaries results in the need to critically engage with their work using theories often borrowed from other fields such as film, design and visual art. By further delineating animation from other forms of moving-image practice, the practice-led researcher is more equipped to develop individual theories on contemporary animation practice. Being initiated in practice and carried out through practice, Gray (1998, 4) describes practice-led research as being a form of “naturalistic inquiry, which places the researcher firmly within the research process”. Creative practice therefore provides the mechanism for generating new knowledge and it is via reflective practice that the practitioner is able to capture that knowledge. This form of enquiry allows the practitioner to become more pro-active in the generation of new knowledge by researching through “action”, and “reflecting in and on action”, (Schön 1983). From this, we can see that by re-exploring animation through the intentions of its creator, Wells and Hardstaff provide a working example of a theoretical framework aligned with practice-led research. By promoting the significance of tacit knowledge ingrained in the animators practice, this framework provides a mechanism for understanding how animation can be further delineated from other forms of creative practice. This approach to animation research brings with it a range of new liberating opportunities, many of which are yet to be fully explored.

Wells and Hardstaff (p. 14) identify that although these new opportunities may be liberating for many artist/animators, there is now a need for teachers, students and industry stakeholders to reconsider how these changes have affected what they do and the contexts within which they operate. A significant proportion of the text is dedicated to addressing problems surrounding animation pedagogy. Wells and Hardstaff argue that there is a desperate need for new pedagogic strategies that respond to the “disciplinary shift”. However, the very term pedagogy is identified as having its own implications, the authors suggest “its premise seems to signal passivity”(p. 18) and that there is a risk of educators aiming at producing students or practitioners with specific skills sets as opposed to generic and transferable skills that make “cross-contextual play natural”,(p. 18). The multidisciplinary nature of animation and the “disciplinary shift” results in a range of ever changing needs and expectations from educators, practitioners and students. The best way in which to address these changing needs and expectations is a challenge and subject to wide debate. Throughout the text, a range of view points on teaching animation are offered, leading to

the identification of at least three core educational models; a Quasi-training model, an Auteurist/Independent model and a Combined Model, (p. 126). In Chapter 4, Wells and Hardstaff demonstrate how educators may be able to deal with the 'messy' state of animation via a detailed account of a project which sought to “interrogate the process by which creative practice in animation might be in some way 'taught'”, (p. 126).

The project was titled *Object React* and was undertaken by Johnny Hardstaff and Darryl Clifton, in collaboration with the Victoria & Albert Museum, Onedotzero, the Institute of Contemporary Arts and Loughborough University, (p.126). The project brief asked students to create a “communicative visual response” to a specifically curated object. The most significant aspect of the brief is in its use of questioning that guides the student to explore more than simply the physical appearance of the object and at no stage is there mention of animation style, technique or technology. Consequently, the students were free to explore the object through whichever form of animation they felt most appropriately captured the objects “true image”. From the examples of student/mentor exchange, we can see that this problem based approach allowed students to identify and delineate their own aspirations within and for the medium. What I found most interesting about the results of the *Object React* project was that by enabling “practitioners to theorise their approach through practice, and practice through their theoretically determined outlooks”, (p. 148) they have demonstrated once again the pertinence of this approach to practice-led research in animation. The project provides useful guidelines for the animation researcher looking for a way to frame their own unique research praxis.

Re-imagining animation: The changing face of the moving image, successfully addresses emerging issues surrounding contemporary animation practice. By broadening the definition of animation beyond the limitations of animation cinema, Wells and Hardstaff re-contextualise animation across a range of interdisciplinary mediums. This text contributes to animation scholarship through its critical engagement with the wider sociocultural context of animation production. As a result, the book provides a theoretical framework for the practice-led researcher and addresses important issues surrounding the pedagogical implications for the teaching of this 'new' moving image culture.

Reference

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